

Emotional Work Takes Courage

By Ilene L. Dillon, M.S.W.©

It is often said that “emotional work is the hardest work there is.” Emotional work involves “digging deep” inside of ourselves to face the fact of what is really going on with us. To do so means looking squarely at our experiences and reactions to those experiences. Most people consider that it takes courage to look squarely and truthfully at our experiences and our emotional reactions. But is that really so?

What is Courage All About?

To determine the answer, let’s look at what Courage is all about. Courage is about having the strength to take risks (like looking squarely at our life), trying new things, or taking action, even when we’re afraid. When we live courageously, we ask ourselves to live our lives fully without benefit of a perceptible full-fledged safety net. As is often said, “Courage is being afraid and taking action anyway!”

Fear

Why are we afraid? Taking risks is by definition an act of faith. When we take risks, we know there is some probability of things not working out, but we have hope and faith that things *will* work out, and so go ahead and take the risk. “Risk” also implies that there is some level of “unknown” involved. Perhaps we don’t know all the dangers, haven’t met all the players, don’t know the “rules” for a particular activity, or need to put trust into someone (including ourselves) that we may not totally trust! All of these unknowns make fertile soil for fear to grow.

Any time we look squarely at our emotions, we are taking a risk, raising internal concerns and fears. Emotional exploration and doing our inner work fits the description of “the unknown,” given the way we have been taught to relate to our emotions, talking more about “negative emotions” and seeing them as “getting out of control,” rather than focusing on emotions as the friends they have been designed to be. (It is possible to understand how emotions work, including that they are really understandable because they follow many of the laws of physics.) When we work with our emotions, what are we going to find? Will they get quickly out of control? Can we trust ourselves to get back in charge of them? Does *anyone* really know what to do with emotions? Perhaps we believe it takes courage to do emotional work because our emotions are so unknown (and, we believe, unknowable) to us!

Exploration Requires Courage

Every act of exploration is an act of courage. An astronaut blasting into outer space on a rocket, sampling a new restaurant, working in a new industry, taking the risk of telling someone

we're dating that we love them, meeting new people, sharing our ideas in front of a group, or getting a new pet.....all of these require a measure of faith, courage, and risk. It is not possible to really *live* a life without taking risks, without exercising courage. In order to be truly alive, we *need* to take some risks and test our own limits. So long as we believe there is inherent "danger" in doing these things, we will have to exercise courage to do them.

Everything Goes Better with.....Responsibility!

Whenever I teach teenagers, I ask them to tell me what they know about "responsibility." Usually, the whole class groans in unison. They don't like the idea of "responsibility," because someone has led them to believe they "have to" take responsibility, and that responsibility most often *means* doing what adults *tell* them to do. This is not what "responsibility" is really about, however. Responsibility is an *opportunity* we are given that will lead us to freedom. We don't really *have to* assume responsibility in life. It's just that being responsible aligns us with how things are set up, like lining up the molecules in a magnet. Everything works better in our lives when we embrace the responsibility for our own lives that we already possess, but perhaps have not claimed.

Taking responsibility is not solely about being responsible to others, nor about restriction, or living up to the expectations of others. It's about freedom! Let me explain.

Humans are born with the *opportunity* to be responsible for their own lives. Even if we never fully learn how life is set up, every thought, emotion and belief we experience creates the life we have while we're on the earth. This means that we *are* responsible, even if we never know or accept it. When we take active charge of this ability, we *manifest* what we want and need, such as a car, new job or loving relationship, and life feels good to us. Life works better if we *accept* the responsibility (for our own lives) that we already have, thus putting ourselves in charge of that life. As we take responsibility, we "explore" life, taking risks, standing up for our own principles and beliefs, and following our inner feelings and guidance. This is where courage comes in.

Or does it need to?

Our World Is a Giant School

It takes far less courage to live a life when we understand what a life here on Planet Earth is all about. Our earth can be viewed as a "giant school," to which we have all come in order to learn and grow. Earth is physical and concrete, so it's a good place to get swift feedback, which in turn, enables us to make corrections. This is the way organisms learn: by moving forward (taking action or risks), encountering feedback, then changing course or making corrections based on the feedback, before moving on to the next self-initiated action.

Thus, we learn as a result of our experience, with each experience an opportunity to learn and grow. In this school, each person has different “lessons.” We receive our “homework assignments” for our lives during childhood, depending on what we encounter. We work on these “homework assignments” until we complete them. or we die. We are *meant* to be able to complete our “assignments.”

The good news: the instant we learn a lesson, we are finished with it, “graduate,” and are free to move on. The bad news: if we don’t learn a particular lesson, we go over and over it, until we do learn it. To encourage us to learn the lesson, each time it is presented to us, it is in a harsher form.

Can you see that by making the choice to take responsibility for your life, you step up to the plate and learn lessons. Then, as you get in the habit of learning your lessons responsibly, you learn them faster. Things become increasingly easier. It may seem to take a *lot* of courage the first few times you decide to responsibly learn a lesson that you are offered, yet the need for courage decreases over time, because you understand how the system works and embrace learning and being responsible for yourself and life. It feels good!

Self-Esteem Improves

Responsibility is one of the four main building blocks of Self-esteem. So, while you are responsibly facing the lessons your life holds for you, and completing your homework assignments, you are also building your self-esteem. Your life just begin to feel better and better!

Under these circumstances, life feels different. Whenever you notice a lesson being presented to you, you immediately decide to explore and find out what you need to learn, moving as soon as possible to learn what an event, emotion or experience with someone presents to you. You get to the point of being excited about learning, because you find out new things, feel good, and develop even higher self-esteem! Why do we need courage to face this set of circumstances? It may be courage we are exercising, but it doesn’t *feel* like courage; it just feels like the responsible thing to do that we know is going to make us feel good and enable us to grow!

A New Paradigm

Look at your newsmagazine or search engine news, glance out your window as you are driving: our world is changing. We are in the midst of an enormous transition, one that involves human consciousness. For the first time in human history, we are all becoming aware that we are the architects of our lives.

This is good news and bad news. The good news is that we can choose more of the life we want to live, merely by working with our beliefs, releasing past history we no longer need or want, using our imagination and focusing our minds and emotions on what we want to become.

The bad news is that we can no longer blame our lives on others; we need to become consciously aware of what we are thinking, feeling and focusing on (be careful what you wish!); and we can no longer turn our lives, physical health, emotions or conduct over to others. The time has come for us to assume the responsibility we have been given. The consequences of *not* assuming this responsibility are growing harsher. Usually, when we are in enough pain, human beings change. The time has come.....make it easy on yourself and change now, before experiencing more pain!

Even though it may seem like you need to act courageously to make change, the more you responsibly embrace change and welcome it, the less you will feel like you are exercising courage! Instead, fear will decrease, excitement will increase; and courage will become a part of you. You will then exercise courage joyfully and with gratitude.

Emotions

It is said by some that the “language” of the Universe is emotion. Unfortunately for most of us, we have been discouraged from learning this language and exploring its nuances. Times are changing so much that we can no longer live without knowing the language of emotions. In fact, the more “emotional linguists” we have in the world, the more smoothly things will flow. Taking responsibility for our emotions, which are part of all of us (at least from birth), is less the courageous thing to do, and more the smart thing to do.

The good news is that “everybody is doing it.” We are all encountering more emotion, getting more information about where emotion resides in us, what emotion is for, and how we can work with it. We are all offered more effective tools and can do “self help” right in our own homes! Thus, there is no better time in history to get to know your emotions than *right now!* Not only are they easier to learn about and more acceptable to have, but there is a lot of help on how to work with, understand and benefit from emotions available. This My Expert Solution web site, for example, has Experts on emotions, so you can ask anonymously how to work with emotions that may be challenging you right now.

Make good use of this resource! Learn all you can about your emotions. Become an emotional master, responsible to yourself for your life. Then things will run much more smoothly, and you will need far less courage as you live your life.